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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the problem of stress within the teacher's environment and ways in which teachers can manage stress. The components of the stress process are identified in terms of the sources of stress and teachers' response to stress. Sources include the events or characteristics of the environmental situation and life events, occupational demands, and other life adjustments the teacher encounters. A comparison is made between two stress management techniques: the global approach and the individual approach. In this comparison, the two methods of stress management training were examined in regard to whether one would result in more action and change by teachers than the other. Results indicated that the teachers trained in the individual approach reported that they significantly increased the time spent on managing their stress, and used more diversity in applying methods to alter major stressors. (JD)

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# Teacher Stress: Issues and Intervention

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## TEACHER STRESS: ISSUES AND INTERVENTION

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, attention has been drawn to the problems of stress among public school teachers due to the increasingly higher rates of turnover (Cunningham, 1982). Various approaches have been taken in describing these concerns, but they all point to the negative impact of stress and subsequent burnout. For example, Litt and Turk, (1985) have noted that in regard to stress among teachers, "the severity and scope of the problem appear unprecedented" (p. 178). Stress has been cited as a major factor in teacher's decisions to leave teaching. Similarly, Cotanch (1984) points out "that job dissatisfaction and burnout probably have contributed to high rates of teacher absenteeism and turnover as well as to increased student apathy, negativism, and misbehavior... others are affected with lethargy, cynicism and despair" (p. 1125). Long (1986) concludes "that there is little question that teachers are facing serious difficulties in their jobs and that this is taking a toll on the quality of education in this country" (p.21).

Beginning with this basic insight, the purpose of this study is to consider stress within the teachers environment and examine methods of assisting public school teachers with managing stress. Before beginning, a review of the conceptualization of stress is in order.

#### Conceptualization of Stress

Within the past several years, few areas of contemporary sociology and psychology have received more attention than stress (Pearlin, 1981; Thoits, 1987;

Hobfoll, 1986, 1988; Kaplan, 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The literature reflects researchers' belief that stress is a major factor affecting individual lives, is linked to mental health, and is tied to problems of physical health.

While there are several stress models (Selye, 1950; Elliot and Eisdorfer, 1982; Spielberger, 1966, 1972; McGrath, 1970; Hobfoll, 1989), confusion may arise depending on whether stress is depicted as a cause or as an effect. The early work by Selye (1950) focused on stress as an effect or a response to a stimulus. More recent work (Elliott and Eisdorfer, 1982; Hobfall, 1989) concentrates on stressors or that which is likely to cause stress. The issue of describing stress as a cause or an effect can present problems with both conceptualization (Dohrenwend, 1979) and research (Catalone and Dooley, 1983). Even though there are some theoretical questions concerning how the term 'stress' should be used, there is a critical need to examine, within the public school setting, both the self-reported cause of teacher stress and the perceived effect of stress on teachers.

With this need in mind, the present research places stress within a process framework (Jenkins, 1986). The components of the stress process are identified in terms of the source of stress and the response to stress. The first component, the source of stress, is characterized by separate events or characteristics of the environmental situation. This includes life events, occupational demands, role pressure and other life adjustments the individual is called on to make. The second component is the stress response. This includes both the interpretation the individual makes as well or the individual's various physical, behavioral, and psychological reactions.

Given this understanding of the process of stress, this study will investigate the sources of stress in a teacher's life and then examine some of the responses that teachers make to these stressors. This conceptualization of

stress will add insight into the relationship of stress within the teacher's environment. A knowledge of the source of stress and effects of stress will help expand the development of more effective stress management methods for teachers, as well as assist teachers in gaining insight into their own stress process.

## Sources of Teacher Stress

Work: A number of researchers in the area of teacher stress have identified a multitude of factors that precipitate stress for the public teacher in the workplace. Dewe (1986) notes that work, like any other setting, exerts its own set of unique forces on the individual. Work stressors include such problems as: (1) task overload (heavy work load, inadequate time for preparation); (2) lack of control over activities and outcomes (lack of teaching aids, inadequate resources, incompetent administration); (3) insufficient satisfactions from work (frequent negative and infrequent positive feedback); (4) role conflicts (career development issues, inadequate time for individual remedial work); (5) rapid or unpredictable change; (6) interpersonal conflicts (disruptive students, pupil misbehavior, difficult social relations); (7) unrealistic expectations; and (8) feelings of inadequacy (negative attitudes).

Home: Researchers Needle (1981) and Galloway (1982) have cited factors outside the workplace in contributing to the stress experienced by teachers. Dewe (1986) notes that there is an interaction between pressures at home and those at school. Here it is observed that the teacher is 'too tired to do many things that he/she wants to do away from school, pressured from home as well, given little recognition of the fact that there are a variety of thing to do outside of school as well' (p.25). Schwab (1986) indicates that work stress results in the deterioration of the quality of one's home life. The negative effects of stress on one's family life may be especially detrimental because,

over time, family members are likely to find it increasingly difficult to remain supportive of the afflicted parent/spouse (p.18). Thus, as if the issues at work weren't enough, the teacher finds the effects of work stress create pressures at home which, no doubt, add to the problems at work.

## Effects of Stress

As stated before, the conceptualization here differentiates the two components of the stress process; one is the source of the stress and the other is the response to the stress. From the previous discussion, various factors have been identified within the teacher's environment which could be sources of stress. The person's reaction to the source of stress will now be considered.

The effects of the stresses from work and home include those that are physical, psychological/emotional and behavioral. Among the physical effects of stress are increased frequency of headaches, sleep disturbance, hypertension, fatigue and tightening of muscles. Psychological/emotional effects include general uneasiness, depression, nervousness, anxiety and loss of confidence. Finally, among behavioral effects are procrastination, impatience with others, low productivity, absenteeism and withdrawal from teaching (Dewe, 1986).

## Recommendations for Coping with Stress

Numerous recommendations have been made concerning methods for improving teachers' coping with stress (e.g. Dewe, 1986; Holt, Fine and Tollefson, 1989). These include methods that have a direct impact on the source of stress such as improving teacher-administrator relationships, job re-design, staff development, and improving the teachers' status. Another approach is the method of utilizing social support from others to increase the individual's tolerance for stress. A third method, known as indirect, involves helping the individual to make some

change in interpretation, behavior or other response to the stressor. This includes exercising, changing diet habits, relaxation and having realistic expectations.

In spite of a lengthy list of recommendations for more effectively coping with pressures, the list of studies in which the effectiveness of such recommendations are examined is much shorter. The few in which effectiveness has been studied have focused primarily on indirect methods of coping either involving others or involving personal change. Among those which have studied coping strategies, Dewe (1986) found that by utilizing social support individuals 'significantly reduced the impact of stress on general well-being and somatic complaints' (p. 180). A summary by Kyriacou (1987) of the literature on coping through changing personal responses concluded that personal strategies aimed at improving teacher's professional skills and competencies to meet the demands of being a teacher have proved more successful than those aimed at developing psychological techniques reducing the experience of stress (p. 150). While not directly examining this issue, Holt's (1987) work in this area recognized the value of attempting to directly change stress and concluded that 'school districts should adopt a proactive stance.... They can encourage more effective stress management within their district by providing in-services or staff development workshops that promote active, rather than passive, responses to a stressful work environment' (p. 57).

Methods of Stress Management Training

The call for stress management workshops for teachers by Turk (1982) has been heard by school systems in many places, which have responded by providing in-service training for teachers in stress management. Unfortunately, little

research evaluating the effectiveness of these workshops (Cotanch, 1984) has been conducted. Hillenberg and DiLorinzo (1987) have criticized the use of a "standard package" or global approach to stress management in clinical settings - one in which every individual is given the same set of information on stress management and left on their own to decide what is applicable and how to utilize the materials. Instead, they have recommended a more individualized approach, tailoring the training to the individual's needs. However, they cited no comparative evaluation of these methods of training.

## Current Study

This study purposes to begin to fill the void of research on effectiveness in coping with stress, by examining two areas: the stress process, and stress management training effectiveness. First, we considered stress in the teacher's environment and examined the effects stress has on teachers. Second, we compared one method of stress management training (global approach) with another method (individual approach). In this comparison, the two methods of stress management training were examined in regard to whether one would result in more action and change by the teachers than the other.

## METHODS

The participants in this study were 124 female public school teachers of grades K-12 from the public school systems of two central Georgia counties. Of these teachers, 39 percent taught at the elementary school level, 50 percent taught at the middle school (grades 6-8) level and 11 percent taught at the high school level. The average number of years of teaching was 15 years for the participants.

### Training Procedure

Approximately three weeks prior to teacher stress management training sessions, sets of pre-stress management questionnaires were sent to the inservice directors, and they in turn distributed them to each participant. The questionnaires were provided for the purpose of determining what stressors existed before the stress management training was conducted. The portion of the questionnaire concerned with sources of stress surveyed major work and home stressors found by others, (e.g. Litt and Turk, 1985; Mykleton, 1984; Dewe, 1986; Pettegrew, 1982) to be common stressors for school teachers. The second portion of the questionnaire surveyed what effects the teachers had been experiencing as a result of these stressors.

After the teachers completed the questionnaires, they returned them to the inservice director, who sent them back to the instructors. Of the 150 who registered for the stress session, 141 (94 percent) men and women completed the pre-stress management questionnaire.

Each of the training sessions lasted approximately three hours. In order to prevent a possible bias, the individual approach was given first at one

school, followed by the global approach; this order was reversed at the other school. While the approaches to the stress management differed, the content of both workshops were identical. At the beginning of each session participants were asked to fill out a form estimating the approximate amount of time they are involved in managing their stress.

In the individualized training method, the participants were then asked to define a major source of stress and its effects and to agree to commit themselves to taking responsibility for doing something about that stressor. Following this, the participants were led through a step-by-step development of an individualized plan for more effectively managing the stressor they had identified at the beginning of the training session. By the end of the session, each participant had his/her own plan for working on this self-identified major stress.

In the global approach training method, information about stress, its sources, effects, and methods for directly and indirectly dealing with it were presented to the participants in a lecture fashion. The focus of the information was on general knowledge about stress and stress management and no attempt was made to direct the participants in the development of individualized plans for managing their own specific stresses.

Approximately three weeks after the training sessions, all participants were sent a set of questions concerning their activities in stress management since the training. Questions concerned the methods of management used since the training in managing stress both at work and at home, changes in the size and function of the participant's social support network, time spent in stress management activities, and perception of effectiveness in managing stress since training. Eighty-three participants or 67 percent who attended the training returned the questionnaire.

## RESULTS

### Sources of Stress

The study of the stress process was begun by considering the first component of the source of stress. This was done by asking the teachers to indicate the top three causes of stress at work and at home.

Table I presents the results of the teachers self-reported sources of stress at work and at home. The major identified stressor at both work and home is overload. This is described as "too much to do." Seventy-one percent indicated that overload is a stressor at work while 69 percent specified that it is a cause of stress at home. The second principal source of stress is also the same for work and home; it is pressure. Again, 63 percent and 61 percent of those responding revealed that pressure and demands at work and home were a concern, respectively. This is portrayed as "too many pressures or demands." It is interesting to note that the third origin of stress differs between work and home. At work, the third most often cited stressor is inadequate rewards or "too few satisfactions." For home, the third mentioned stressor is interpersonal concerns with either children, spouse or other family members.

Table I

**Source of Stress**
N=116

| **At Work** | **Responses** | **Percent** |
|---|---|---|
| Overload | 83 | 71% |
| Pressure | 80 | 69% |
| Inadequate Rewards | 53 | 46% |
| **At Home** | **Responses** | **Percent** |
| Overload | 73 | 63% |
| Pressure | 71 | 61% |
| Interpersonal Concerns | 51 | 44% |

Response to Stress

The second component within the stress process is the effects the source of stress has on the individual. The teachers were asked to indicate, from a set of physiological, psychological and behavioral items, their reactions to the stress that is of greatest concern at work and at home. Of the physical effects listed, the greatest consequence was fatigue. The most frequent psychological reaction recorded was depression. And, lastly, the most common behavioral response listed was procrastination.

In order to further explore the effects of stress, cross-tabulations were generated between the two major sources of stress at work and home, and the effects of stress. Table II describes the self-reported reactions to overload and pressure at work and home. Under the physical effects category, 49 women or 79 percent who marked overload as a work stressor reported fatigue. Likewise, this is true for teachers who believe a source of stress at home is overload. Sixty percent of those indicating overload, state they have fatigue. The teachers who report pressure as an origin of stress at home and work report less fatigue than those who listed overload.

Concerning the psychological effects, it was found that 15 women or 24 percent who marked overload as a work stressor report depression. Similarly, 16 percent of those indicating overload at home also reveal depression as a reaction to stress. As with the physical effects, teachers who report pressure at work and home tend to have less psychological effects than those who indicate overload at work and home.

The most common behavioral effect is procrastination. Those teachers who self-report overload as a source of stress list procrastination as an effect more than those indicating pressure.

Overall, these results demonstrate the stress framework. Table II specifies both components of the process; the source of stress and the stress response. The two major perceived sources of stress at work and at home are overload and pressure. This sample of teachers report more effects related to overload than to pressure. This is true in both the work setting and home

Table II

**SPECIFIC REACTIONS TO OVERLOAD AND PRESSURE AT WORK AND HOME**

| | WORKSTRESSOR N=116 (% of total) | | HOMESTRESSOR N=116 (% of total) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Physical Effect** | Overload | Pressure | Overload | Pressure |
| 1. Fatigue | 49 (79%) | 24 (30%) | 44 (60%) | 13 (18%) |
| 2. Tension Headache | 40 (65%) | 12 (15%) | 38 (52%) | 6 ( 8%) |
| 3. Can't Sleep | 21 (34%) | 7 ( 9%) | 16 (22%) | 3 ( 4%) |
| 4. Concentration Problems | 19 (31%) | 5 ( 6%) | 18 (25%) | 4 ( 4%) |
| **Psychological Effect** | | | | |
| 1. Depression | 15 (24%) | 3 ( 4%) | 12 (16%) | 4 ( 6%) |
| 2. Anxious | 9 (15%) | 5 ( 6%) | 10 (14%) | 2 ( 3%) |
| 3. Overwork | 13 (21%) | 6 ( 8%) | 11 (15%) | 3 ( 4%) |
| **Behavioral Effect** | | | | |
| 1. Procrastination | 13 (21%) | 7 ( 9%) | 12 (16%) | 6 ( 8%) |

setting. Interestingly, when examining the different effects of stress at work as opposed to at home, it was found that there are more reactions toward the stressors at work versus at home. This implies that the two self-reported stressors have a greater perceived effect on the individual at work than the same stressor at home.

Stress Training Differences

The second part of the study examined two different methods of stress management approaches. While the same materials were covered in both, the question is whether one group took more action in managing their stress than the other group. Three weeks after the stress training, participants were sent a survey asking specific questions about how they were managing the major self-identified stressor at work and at home. Table III highlights the differences between the two different approaches.

Table III

**Differences by Selected Items**

| Items | | Individual Approach N=41 (% of response) | Global Approach N=42 (% of response) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Since the workshop, are you doing anything about managing the major stress at work? | Yes | 11 (28%) | 6 (14%) |
| Since the workshop, are you doing anything different about managing the major stress at home? | Yes | 18 (44%) | 11 (26%) |

The results show that a greater percentage of teachers have done something about managing the major stressor at home than at work. This is true regardless of the approach used. This is in direct contrast to the self-reported source of stress and reaction to stress. In both, the major stressor and effect of stress occurs in the work environment. Additionally, Table III shows evidence that more teachers trained in the individual approach report that they are doing something about work and home stressors than those who received the global approach.

In order to more closely examine the stress management of differences, the participants were asked to describe the methods they used. Managing stress is accomplished in three ways: (1) Direct - a method which has a direct effect on the source of stress; (2) Indirect - a method which helps the individual utilize ways to help survive the stress such as exercising, diet changes and relaxation; and (3) Social Support - a method which encourages support from others in order to tolerate stress better. Table IV indicates the two major methods the teachers utilized in the management of stress at work and home.

Table IV

**Methods Utilized in Management of Stress**

| Methods | Individual Approach N=41 | Global Approach N=42 |
|---|---|---|
| Direct at work | 1. Reducing amount of work<br>2. Taking control<br>3. Reducing the pressures | 1. Confronting others |
| Direct at home | 1. Reducing amount of of work<br>2. Take control<br>3. Reducing the pressures<br>4. Change what there is to do<br>5. Look for other satisfactions<br>6. Change roles<br>7. Resolve hassles<br>8. Develop problem solving skills | 1. Confronting others<br>2. Reduce amount of work<br>3. Take control<br>4. Change what there is to do<br>5. Change roles |
| Indirect at work | 1. Exercise<br>2. Thinking positively<br>3. Time management<br>4. Developing a hobby | 1. Exercise<br>2. Thinking positively |
| Indirect at home | 1. Exercise<br>2. Relaxation<br>3. Thinking positively<br>4. Time management<br>5. Developing a hobby | 1. Exercise<br>2. Time management<br>3. Change in eating habits |

The methods used by the teachers were the direct and the indirect. The direct method was used by the majority of those trained in the individual approach while direct and indirect utilization was fairly equal for those trained in the global approach. What is of interest in the individual approach is the diversity in modifying the major stress at work and at home. For example, the direct methods used for the individual group at work were "reducing the amount of work," "taking control," and "reducing the pressures," while the global group only noted "confronting others" as a way to alter work stress. This is true regardless of which method was employed or whether at work or at home. From these results it appears that those teachers trained in the individual approach practiced more diversity in stress management techniques in both the work and home environments.

The last question of the study sought to answer the question of whether one method of stress management training resulted in more time devoted to stress management. In order to consider whether there was a difference, each group of teachers were asked how much time per week they are involved in activities to manage stress. This was asked before the training and again in the follow-up questionnaire.

Table V

**T-Tests of Differences Between Pre and Post Training Time Spent on Managing Stress**

| | Pre-Training | | | Post-Training | | | T-Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Approach** | Mean | df | SD | Mean | df | SD | |
| Global | 2.06 | 30 | 1.10 | 2.28 | 40 | .88 | 1.0, p=.250 |
| Individual | 1.83 | 35 | .86 | 2.63 | 39 | 2.00 | 2.35, p=.025* |

*significant p>.05 level

The results seem to indicate that there are differences between the groups. The t-test of the differences of the means between the pre and post stress management training shows that teachers trained in the global approach did not significantly increase the time spent on managing stress from before the training to three weeks after the training. However, the t-test for the individual approach between the pre and post time spent on stress management does reveal a significant increase (p>.02 level). In other words, the teachers trained in the individual approach report that they did significantly increase the time spent on managing their stress while those trained in the global approach did not report a significant increase. With this sample of teachers it appears that the type of stress management approach does make a difference. This study found some interesting variations between the groups in regard to actions taken by the teachers, the diversity utilized, and time spent on managing stress. These will now be summarized.

Summary

Teacher stress is a major problem in the school environment today. In an effort to better understand this problem, a study was undertaken. The aim of this study was two-fold: the first was to gain insight into the stress process within the teachers' environment, and the second to use this knowledge to investigate stress management training effectiveness. Stress was conceptualized as a process. The beginning of the process is the source of stress for the individual and concludes with one's response to stress. The first part of the study considered what teachers report as major stressors. It was found that overload was identified as the number one stressor in both the work and home setting. Apparently, for this sample of teachers, the feeling of having too much to do is pervasive at both work and home. Similarly, pressure was noted as the second major source of stress for work and home. Again, teachers find having too many demands a problem. The third cited stress at work is the problem of inadequate rewards while the next mentioned stressor at home is the problem of interpersonal relations with family members.

The other component of examining the stress process is exploring the consequences of the stress reaction as perceived by the teachers. The reactions were listed as physical, psychological and behavioral effects. While the actual type of responses were typical of other study results, an interesting pattern emerged as far as the number of responses for specific stressors. As noted earlier, overload and pressure were reported as the top two stressors at both work and home. However, teachers who report overload as an origin of stress at home or at work report far more stress effects than those who report pressure as a stressor. This is observed for all three areas: physical, psychological and behavioral effects (Table II). The pattern of reporting more stress

reactions to overload is true for both work and home.

This interesting pattern suggests that the difference may be in the interpretation of the terms "overload" and "pressure." Overload is described as having the feeling of too much to do while pressure is having too many demands made on a person. Perhaps pressure is viewed as functioning at an accelerated pace with a lot of demands, but overload is the point at which the stressful situation becomes a burden and the consequences of stress begin to affect the individuals.

The second part of the study considered the two methods of stress management training. Even though the results (Table III) indicate there is more of a stress problem at work in terms of the source and its effect, teachers trained in both the individualized and global approach report that they attempted to manage the major stressor at home rather than at work. This indicates that teachers believe the options at work are much more narrow while there are more alternatives at home for managing stress. This is further reinforced by considering the methods utilized in the management of stress (Table IV). Both stress management approaches reported more method utilization of stress at home than at work.

When considering whether the different methods of stress management training resulted in more action and change by the teachers, we found some interesting outcomes were found. While both groups were making an attempt to manage the major stressor at home and at work, the individual approach group reported a far greater percentage were doing something about stress management than the global approach group. This was true for both work and home settings.

Not only was it found that teachers trained in the individual approach exercised greater stress management, but also that they used more diversity in applying the methods to alter the major stressor. Table IV highlights the results of the two approaches. The number of methods employed by those from the

individual approach exceed the methods practiced by those trained in the global approach. This is true regardless of the method employed or whether at work or at home.

As a way of measuring which method of stress management training resulted in more action and change by teachers, both groups of teachers were asked the how much time they spent per week in managing stress. This was done before the training and three weeks after the training. The results show only the teachers receiving the individual approach did significantly increase the time they spent on managing stress.

The results from this study indicate that teachers trained in the individual approach appear to do more about managing their stress, use more diversity in altering the stress and spend more time in stress management activities.

## Recommendations

School systems have responded to the teacher stress problem by providing in-service training, but rarely are these workshops evaluated for effectiveness. This present evaluation research points to an alarming problem. Even though teachers report more stress at work in terms of source and effect, they do not appear to have the opportunity to deal with the stress at work. Regardless of which approach the teachers were trained in, they felt there were fewer options to deal with the stress in the teaching environment.

A possible mechanism for stress management for teachers at work may be the development of "quality circles" (Hare, 1982). This type of employee involvement process, used in industry, works with small groups. These groups identify problems in their work place and develop cost effective solutions to problems. The problems and solutions presented to management with the understanding that they will be given serious consideration. From a stress management point of

view, quality circles provide an opportunity for direct modification of sources of stress in the work place through problem solving, the chance for generating feelings of control and autonomy in the participants, and mutual social support for those in the groups. Given the nature of most school systems, quality circles composed of teachers, engaging in issues of stress and presenting these solutions to principals and school boards could be an effective device for stress management for teachers.

The second recommendation is for instructors to begin tailoring the training toward the individual's needs rather than the "standard package" or global approach. The results of this evaluation research reveals that teachers trained in the individual approach do more about managing their stress than those trained in the global approach. Additionally, teachers taught problem-solving methods utilize more diversity in methods of stress management and appear to spend more time managing their stress than those trained in the global approach.

The last recommendation is that more research be directed toward evaluating stress workshop effectiveness. It is apparent from this study that there are major sources of stress and effects of stress in the teachers invironment. School systems must begin providing opportunities for teachers to manage the stressors at work. This important effort can be documented by evaluating the stress process and using this understanding to gain insight into stress management training effectiveness. Whatever can be done to help teachers face the difficulties of their job will ultimately assist in improving the quality of education.

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